

Movement in Kindergarten Life

Introduction: Learning through Movement

From our earliest days in the womb right through our lives, physical activity is critical to our human make up. Before modern conveniences “eased” our survival load, the movement we needed for our wellbeing and for our learning was a natural part of everyday life: lifting, bending, hauling, digging, walking long distances, chasing, riding horses, chopping - all these were commonplace. Today, our bodies and minds are still driven by ancient needs and still follow ancient scripts; therefore, if we are to realize our potential – accessing our inherent vitality by integrating body, speech, and mind – we must make a conscious effort to bring meaningful movement back into our lives. For children this is even more important.

We have all seen the child who does not get enough activity go stir crazy. We intuitively know that the whining or fighting or jumping off the furniture is a cry to engage in some real movement. But it is also far more than that. **During childhood – the time when growth is at its peak – learning takes place first and foremost through activity in the body.** Beginning in the womb, even before the first aimless batting hands of the newborn, on a physiological level the child is building the actual structures of his brain through movement. As Maria Montessori describes it, “The child learns all he will ever know first through his senses.” Movement is the first of these senses; it is the ground of all learning.

Understanding movement to be our base, we turn our focus to structuring meaningful and productive movement into our days with the children. This Learning Through Movement collection is designed to help with just that. To begin with, it is important to identify what kinds of movement are most conducive to wellbeing and to learning. In the Enki approach we work with four types of movement to meet different goals:

- 1) Coming Together / Group Forming;
- 2) Physical Engagement or Blood and Breathe;
- 3) Sensory Integration;
- 4) Emotional Expression; and
- 5) Instruction through movement.

It is important to realize that if any particular approach is to be affective it must work well within the structure or fabric of our days. In schools this is relatively easy to accomplish because the entire structure of the day is built around the children. The children usually come in full of energy and eager to connect with one another. How we meet these needs will determine how the rest of the day’s undertakings unfold. Beginning the day with an active and musical morning circle can meet the needs of the child and fits well into the flow of the day for the learning community.

For families, however, the day is far longer and is structured differently. This structure must meet the many needs of keeping family life flowing, and the demands of very different ages. For some families, beginning the day with a movement circle – just as you would in a school – will help to bring the family together and ground everyone in the health of their physical bodies. For these families, a morning circle will be an important part of home life. For others, beginning the day with a morning circle would add undue strain and irritation, driving the family members apart rather than bringing them together. For them, circle would be an overlay that would set them off on a day of battles and unhappiness! For these families we look at ways to integrate the movement work into the normal flow of family life, such as outside chores or an energetic bike ride or walk. This is explored at length in the Early Childhood Teaching Guides and, briefly, in the following section.

Movement Goals

With an eye towards how and when movement work might fit into our days in a natural and supportive manner, we turn our attention to the actual forms of movement that will be most helpful.

1) Coming together as a wholesome community (class or family):

In a classroom and in some families this will naturally take place in a formal circle. In other families, a “family breakfast” may be plenty or a morning walk or an adventure walk through the house (see Preparing and Leading Movement Activities in the Early Childhood Guide). It does not matter how this is accomplished; what does matter that there be a gathering, a coming together as a family or as a class to start the day – with whoever can be there at the start of the day. A ritual of song and activity will help establish this as the “coming together” time.

2) Nourishing and engaging the physical body:

The human body, heart, and mind are dependent on significant and regular physical engagement. Our bodies operate on a rhythmic flow - breath, heartbeat, digestion, and so on. Therefore, beginning the day with rhythmic activities that awaken and activate the breath, heartbeat, and muscles will support everyone’s health.

There are many ways to accomplish this, with or without a circle. In this collection, the body engaging activities are listed under Opening Activities and Midlines. One suggestion is skipping around in a circle for movement circle songs, if a circle doesn’t fit well at home perhaps you adapt by skipping around the furniture or up and down the stairs. Some families may find that another activity may work better to awaken and engage the breath and heart: a morning walk; regular playground time; farm chores; adventure walks, and so on. What is important is that the child – and the parent – awaken and engage their breath, heartbeat, and large muscles for 15 or 20 minutes every day. The earlier in the day this can happen, the more it can support all the learning and play that follow.

3) Sensory and Reflex Integration:

Sensory Integration, including integration of the primitive reflexes, is a primary task of early childhood and a process on which all learning and behavior depend.¹ This can happen in or out of a circle; but it does require awareness through observation.

As described, we have three base senses through which all our experience is first taken in. Each of these must work well on its own and in harmony with the others.; this, in turn, rests on the efficient integration of the primitive reflexes. If all three base senses do not function reasonably, then all the sensory material that flows constantly through our lives (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch and, so on) is experienced as invasive and threatening because we cannot integrate what is coming into us. This triggers our survival response.² Imagine being in a subway station with smells of chocolate chip cookies and overcooked broccoli, itching from hives all over, and a with strobe light flashing – this is much how the dis-integrated child experiences every moment. Now try solving a mathematical problem or reflecting on the deep meaning of Harry Potter while the subway pulls up. For the child this usually results in attention deficit, hyperactivity, or withdrawal – as it would for any of us experiencing this overload! Sensory Integration is what makes it possible to interpret the input in a useful manner.

All of us fall somewhere on the human spectrum of competence in this area – from those at either end who are severely challenged and manifest this disintegration in autism, hyperactivity, and significant learning disabilities, to the wide range in the middle where we function relatively effectively. The person with perfect sensory integration is a myth so we can leave that out of the discussion!

Since we all have some challenges in the integration of our senses, as adults most of us in the middle of the spectrum have found ways to compensate for the resulting overload. These **compensatory strategies are more and less effective, but always use more energy for a given result than would proper integration.** Children will fall into different places on the spectrum of difficulty and ease too and in the early years – right up to puberty – while the children’s neurological systems are still very flexible and growing quickly, our goal in the movement work is to nourish and help integrate these systems so that other, less useful, strategies are not needed. As detailed in the Early Childhood Guides, we focus on this in our daily movement work because **our experience is that five minutes of focused integration work done regularly is more valuable than longer stretches less frequently. As well, it is most effective when the breath, heart, and muscles are already awake and engaged.**

Parent in Colorado

We started doing a formal circle. Joseph participated maybe 50% of the time. He rarely did any of the vestibular movements. Then we changed the rhythm of our day and

¹ See Foundation Guides Book III/Integration of Body, Speech, and Mind/Integration of Body, and Early Childhood Guide/Movement

² See Foundation Guides Book III/Integration of Body, Speech, and Mind/Integration of Body/role of sensory integration in the fight/flight – freeze cycle

started doing focused SI [Sensory Integration] movement after we had walked, run, skipped a bit outdoors, and now he will participate. He actually will ask to do the spinning activities.

We encourage focused inclusion of base sense on a regular basis. But it is also important to keep in mind that, in both the classroom and the homeschool, there are many activities that integrate the senses that are already part of, or can easily become part of, the normal work-and-play life, day in and day out. Undertakings such as moving desks, hauling wood, mopping, raking, jumping on the furniture, family yoga, horseback riding, playing in sand and mud, kneading dough, swinging, rough housing, and so on, all support these base sense systems and some midline development as well. This movement can happen in or out of a circle; it requires awareness, but not necessarily a circle.

4) Midline Crossing

The ability to cross all three midlines³ – left/right, up/down, forward/back – is a natural result of the effective integration of the primitive reflexes and the base senses. This ability to cross all three midlines reflects our ability to move freely across the different sections of our brains, communicating more and more efficiently internally. This development generally becomes quite efficient by the time the children are five or six. Therefore, we want to observe attempts at these crossings to see what support is needed at a deeper level, and we want to practice these crossings once they are happening, to strengthen this internal communication. Midline crossing activities are generally part of the initial engagement activities described earlier.

5) Emotional Expression through movement:

Group movement work affords us a non-conceptual way to converse about emotions with the children . This happens on two levels. First, and daily, in the course of the movement work, we embody and act out many different kinds of emotion or energy, all within a safe container. The children know in their bodies that these are activities directed by a teacher and each happens in a short duration and with a clear end. In that container, the children can explore things that scare them and celebrate things often kept under control. So the reserved child can explore the fierceness of the lion roaring or the wildness of pounding horses, and the child who can't seem to let his boisterous energy come to rest, is the sleeping lion and the slowly growing plant. This extends the children's tolerance for emotional differences and personality differences, and it also allows the teacher to demonstrate that all behaviors are welcome and that she is afraid of none. Not anger, not deep sadness, not bursting joy and mischief, but that she can simply hold space for all feelings, not letting them overflow their banks and hurt or be hurt by these. This is a huge investment in developing trust.

Periodically, the teacher may also use movement connected to a specific story to activate and then integrate a survival pattern (fight/flight-freeze) that she is seeing caught in a given child, or that she feels

³ See Foundation Guides Book III/Integration of Body, Speech, and Mind/Integration of Body/crossing midlines, and Early Childhood Guide/Movement

the group as a whole will benefit from. Here, as with all targeted movement work, it is important to precede with a sense of interest in the children's process and not one of destination or accomplishment.

There is some very powerful emotional/trauma release work being done through movement. In Enki we work from the perspective of Somatic Experiencing, by Peter Levine. We are not working at a therapy level but at a "healthy meal" level – as always, if a child is particularly triggered by the work, we recommend to the parents **seeking professional remedial help**. That said, there is much we can do to help lay a kinesthetic map that will foster release of trauma patterns both in the moment and long standing.

Along with these developmental supports, morning movement offers a chance for the children to express themselves creatively. When the adult feels it supports the child's health – and this may be a daily event or an occasional one – the adult opens the space for the child(ren) to enter into dance or story through movement.

5) Instruction through movement:

Movement is one of the central human tools for both learning and teaching, for taking in the new, experiencing others, communicating, expressing ourselves, connecting to the world, and creating. For young children it is a primary tool – initially, in infancy, it is one of the only tools they have! Therefore, we want to make use of this gift and strengthen and stabilize it in early childhood, i.e. its natural time on center stage. This, too, can happen in or out of a formal circle, but including games and activities that lay a rhythmic foundation for later academic pursuits is supportive of later learning. And several are included in this collection.

Skills needed for both academic and artistic pursuits also require significant fine motor coordination. Activities to support this development, particularly those needed for handwriting, are found in the Fingerplays and Academic Games section of this book.

If we work with seasonal songs and verses throughout the movement times, we add two more important academic elements: soaking in the textures and color of the season (science learning); and soaking in the rhythms and images of the spoken language (language arts). Some might think we were playing and exercising, but after the first activity of the day we have already done major work in four "subject areas" – P.E., Language Arts, Math, and Science!